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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which social class and high school guidance operations combine to shape a high school student's perceptions of her opportunities for a college education. It is also an analysis of the intersection of family, friends, and school network effects and how they create an individual's biography. Students connect with colleges through a complex interactive process. Approximately 62% of high school seniors find places in approximately 3,600 colleges, figures that suggest that the opportunity structure is fair, open, and based on merit. In fact, the opportunity structure does not work equally well for all. This study is guided by principles that a student's cultural capital affects the level and quality of the education the student intends to acquire, and that a student's choice of college will make sense in the context of that student's family, friends, and outlook. Then, through a process of bounded rationality, the student will limit the number of alternatives actually considered. Case studies of 12 white females of average academic performance, from a working-class public school, an upper middle-class public school, a private school, and a Catholic school are supplemented by interviews with a parent and friend of each student and the guidance counselors from the 4 schools. Following an introduction to the study in chapter 1, chapter 2 introduces the seniors being followed. Chapter 3 analyzes the environments of the four high schools. The college counseling process is explored in chapter 4, and chapter 5 examines the influences of family, friends, finances, and high school jobs. Chapter 6 summarizes how students' aspirations develop and vary across socioeconomic groups and school contexts. Findings illustrate the extreme complexity of college choice and the many factors that have an impact on student decision making. (Contains 5 tables and 139 references.) (SLD)

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